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October 28, 2007

"Vujà De: It's déjà vu all over again: 'Breaking New Ground"

Rev. Jim Wood

Good morning, Church. It's good to be together. Thank our youth for leading us in worship this morning; another great job and a blessing for us. We are looking in this fall series at how it is that we find God's presence in the midst of all that the world brings, when others don't seem to quite grasp what is going on, how it is that we find His comfort and His presence. We are doing that by walking through Paul's letters to Timothy. Today we are beginning the second letter, but before we turn to the New Testament, we want to look at a passage in the Old Testament today that comes from the prophet Joel. It's in the second chapter and begins at the 18th verse. This is a passage at the end that has become extremely well-known in the Christian church because it is a passage from which we draw in Acts the Pentecost experience and the birth of the church and the pouring out of God's spirit on all of His people.

Before we get to that a little bit of help is probably necessary for Joel. Joel is not a very long book; it's a short prophetic text. Joel is one of the Minor Prophets. Scholars aren't sure of the dating, but they think it is somewhere around the late sixth, early fifth century before Christ. It is clear that there has been some national tragedy that has taken place and it's also clear that the Temple is still there, so that's probably the best time for the dating of it. It's speaking about the day of the Lord, and we talked about that a little bit last week from the Amos text if you were with us. Today there is an understanding in Joel that the day of the Lord is going to be preceded by a locust infestation, an attack of locusts. Nobody is quite sure how that notion develops, but it is a strong understanding among the people of the time in Joel. He starts to speak about that, and yet in the midst of that prophecy of what God sees as happening because the people have turned away there's this amazing power in this passage because this is the passage that speaks of what God will do out of that, the power of what God would do in response to that tragedy.

Listen for the word of our Lord.

Old Testament Reading – Joel 2:18-32

Then the LORD became jealous for his land, and had pity on his people.

In response to his people the LORD said: I am sending you grain, wine, and oil, and you will be satisfied; and I will no more make you a mockery among the nations.

I will remove the northern army far from you, and drive it into a parched and desolate land, its front into the eastern sea, and its rear into the western sea; its stench and foul smell will rise up. Surely he has done great things!

Do not fear, O soil; be glad and rejoice, for the LORD has done great things!

Do not fear, you animals of the field, for the pastures of the wilderness are green; the tree bears its fruit, the fig tree and vine give their full yield.

O children of Zion, be glad and rejoice in the LORD your God; for he has given the early rain for your vindication, he has poured down for you abundant rain, the early and the later rain, as before.

The threshing floors shall be full of grain, the vats shall overflow with wine and oil.

I will repay you for the years that the swarming locust has eaten, the hopper, the destroyer, and the cutter, my great army, which I sent against you.

You shall eat in plenty and be satisfied, and praise the name of the LORD your God, who has dealt wondrously with you. And my people shall never again be put to shame.

You shall know that I am in the midst of Israel, and that I, the LORD, am your God and there is no other. And my people shall never again be put to shame.

Then afterward I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions.

Even on the male and female slaves, in those days, I will pour out my spirit.

I will show portents in the heavens and on the earth, blood and fire and columns of smoke.

The sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood, before the great and terrible day of the LORD comes.

Then everyone who calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved; for in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there shall be those who escape, as the LORD has said, and among the survivors shall be those whom the LORD calls.

Now in the New Testament. Paul is writing this letter to Timothy. We are moving to the 2nd letter today. I would encourage you to go back and look at the 1st letter to Timothy and look at the 2nd, they're not long. They're very worthwhile in reading. You'll find in the first letter Paul is writing to someone that he has mentored, someone who he calls "his beloved child," someone that he has a strong spiritual connection with, but, the first letter to Timothy really focuses on some of the issues that the church faces, his ministry, what's happening to him, how he's responding, how the people are responding to God's word. It's an exhortation, it's a

communication, and it's something to Timothy about Timothy's role. The 2nd letter of Timothy is radically different. If you have any discouragement it's a great letter to read. Paul is writing to a young man that he knows is struggling right now.

It appears even from this first chapter as we read it that Timothy is wrestling with some kind of shame, some sense of rejection, some sense of not belonging, some sense of being an outsider. That's understandable, actually. Timothy was a great young man. He had great potential. Paul used him in some powerful ways when Paul and Silas and Timothy were together. He leaves him in Thessalonica in a church that had tremendous issues; he trusted him enough as a young man to be a leader there and brings great joy to Paul when he comes back and shows him that the church in Thessalonica is doing incredibly well. He trusts Timothy enough to send Timothy with a letter to the church in Corinth when the church in Corinth was dealing with all kinds of rough stuff. He's got great respect and he has great admiration for Timothy, but Timothy struggles. He struggles it appears with some depression. He struggles with being accepted. He struggles with his response when he's not accepted.

A part of this makes sense, I think. Timothy's mother and grandmother you will hear about today, Lois and Eunice, are Jews. He's raised by his mother and grandmother in the Jewish tradition but his father is a Gentile. Timothy was not circumcised, so though technically because his mother was a Jew, he is a Jew, he's really what that culture would call a half breed. He doesn't really belong in one or another. The Gentiles don't accept him because his mother's Jewish. The Jews don't really accept him because his father's a Gentile and in particular because his father evidently had decided that he not be circumcised. Paul actually is with Timothy and circumcises him later in ministry, not because it is necessary, but you almost assume that it's because it was something that Timothy needed to feel as if he belonged. So, Timothy is living his life in two worlds and it's such a difficult place for someone to be, and in the midst of that it seems only natural to start to wrestle with inadequacies, or how he fits, or how he's accepted, or how he's welcomed. Or, how when he is rejected how does he respond to that. I think they are issues that play out in the world as well today, the same types of things for us as we live in different worlds and we wonder how it is that we respond and how it is that we come to know our acceptance and our love. When you read the 2nd letter, Paul is really writing to Timothy, the man that he has mentored and that he loves and wants to encourage.

Listen for the word of our Lord again.

New Testament Reading – 2 Timothy 1

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, for the sake of the promise of life that is in Christ Jesus,

To Timothy, my beloved child: Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord.

I am grateful to God—whom I worship with a clear conscience, as my ancestors did—when I remember you constantly in my prayers night and day.

Recalling your tears, I long to see you so that I may be filled with joy.

I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that lived first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, lives in you.

For this reason I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of my hands;

for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.

Do not be ashamed, then, of the testimony about our Lord or of me his prisoner, but join with me in suffering for the gospel, relying on the power of God,

who saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works but according to his own purpose and grace. This grace was given to us in Christ Jesus before the ages began,

but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.

For this gospel I was appointed a herald and an apostle and a teacher,

and for this reason I suffer as I do. But I am not ashamed, for I know the one in whom I have put my trust, and I am sure that he is able to guard until that day what I have entrusted to him.

Hold to the standard of sound teaching that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.

Guard the good treasure entrusted to you, with the help of the Holy Spirit living in us.

You are aware that all who are in Asia have turned away from me, including Phygelus and Hermogenes.

May the Lord grant mercy to the household of Onesiphorus, because he often refreshed me and was not ashamed of my chain;

when he arrived in Rome, he eagerly searched for me and found me

—may the Lord grant that he will find mercy from the Lord on that day! And you know very well how much service he rendered in Ephesus.

We are in an exciting day. Our groundbreaking is going to be right at noon right outside. I encourage you, pray that you will go to a Sunday School class, and then come and gather with us, children, adults, everyone. Please stay around for this. It will be a great time for us. This has been years in the working and the praying and the growth in our family. It's been two years in the planning and all kinds of work and effort that has gone into it and it's just a great, great day

for us to be able to celebrate. It's the beginning of all kinds of havoc that's going to break loose in the coming year and a half with all of the building stuff that's going on.

We were meeting with the contractor the other day talking about the groundbreaking and the contractor asked us, "What are you doing for the groundbreaking?" We talked a little bit, and he said, "Do you want a golden shovel to use?" Frances Dille who's kind of been coordinating the groundbreaking part, said, "Yeah, a golden shovel would be great." He said, "Do you want more than one?" Lucy Gates, who does our children's ministries, says, "We'll take two." I'm thinking, "Wow, this is an eight and half million dollar thing. This is a contractor, and they're giving us golden shovels, I'm like, "Can we have more?" thinking we could get enough of these to kind of help with the campaign (laughter), help with making some money, golden shovels. He said, "I suppose so," and he kind of looks at me and he said, "How many do you want?" I said, "Can we have nine?" I just made up nine. He says, "I'll give you nine." I'm thinking, "Man, this is great. These are generous people. We're going to make some money off of it and all." He brings these nine shovels. I've got one right here. It's a golden shovel. But, you know what I didn't realize? It's just a shovel painted gold (laughter). I don't know – I think it even loses value when you paint a shovel gold. This is not what I had in mind. I'm always looking for the free deal (laughter), always looking for some little trick or some little loophole that's going to make it work and this just did not play out the way I thought. I was telling somebody about that the other day, somebody I love dearly, who said, "Jim, you just need to grow up" (laughter). I hear that a lot, particularly from people that I love.

Growing up is an interesting thing. We had a men's retreat out at the Eastern Shore this weekend. We had 73 guys out there, all different ages and backgrounds. It was a great time. I want to start out by saying, we forgot to do this, but there is a covenant for all the men that went – what happens at the Eastern Shore stays at the Eastern Shore (laughter) and anything that Jim said related to anything that might relate to someone else is forbidden to ever be talked about. It was a great time. It was a real interesting time as we were together. We were talking about the marks of a Christian man and one of those as we were processing it came up with a thought or an issue or something before us of "What is it to grow up and to be a man and not to be a boy?" I think that is a serious, serious question for the world today, for our culture in particular. So many other cultures have that written within in it. It's in the fabric, the DNA of the culture, what is it to have rites of passage where boys know what it is when they finally become men and they are welcomed into manhood. Other cultures do almost the same thing for women as well when they know that they are moving from being a girl to being a woman. Those rites of passage are always communicated by the women or the men of that culture and they are always shared with them, they are always told "You are now a man or you are now a woman." There are certain things that they do, certain ways that they live.

Our culture seems to have lost that. There's a book that came out this year called *The Death of the Grown-up* by Diana West¹ who writes for the Washington Times. She goes through and mentions some interesting things. She mentions that I think fifteen years ago the average age of a gamer, someone using an X-Box, Wii, or Nintendo was 13. The average age of a gamer right now is 30 (Jim Gates has four more years before he's at the average!) (laughter). SpongeBob SquarePants was made for kids between the ages of 6 and 11. Do you know how many people in America between the ages of 19 and 49 watch it without a child, just by themselves in the U.S.? 19 million people. She's talking about all of this stuff, and that's all kind of fun stuff when you look at it, but she goes back and she says when you really think about it what it is to be a grown up, she goes back to 1945 when Frank Sinatra was giving a concert. This was back when he was the great, great heartthrob of America and the teenagers that were there were getting loud, and he

stopped the concert in the middle of a song and he told them to quiet down because they were disturbing the grown-ups.

Her point in this is that today's world is turned the other way around. The grown-ups need to stay quiet because they might be disturbing the children in the larger culture as we look at it. I'm not sure I want to go as far as she does, but I do want to ask the question. What is it to become a man? What is it to become a woman? It seems almost as if the culture today tells us that there are two different worlds – there's a world of boys and a world of men, there's a world of girls and a world of women and the one that gets the most attention, the one that draws the most attention is the one of boys and of girls. I'm not talking about chronology, and this is the thing that I find really interesting about this, this is not a chronological issue. This is an issue of what is it ultimately truly to be a man, what is it to be a woman. There are many people that I know in their 80's who have never learned what it is to be a man, still kind of going around as boys. It made a TV show famous for I don't know many years. Not only was Seinfeld a show about nothing but it was a show about how you could be a boy and stay a boy the rest of your life, even if you are a girl. The girl in there is just one of the boys.

What is it to become a man? What is it as Paul would say, "When I was a child I played as a child, I thought as a child, I reasoned as a child ... When I became an adult I put away childish things." What is that? Timothy is wrestling with that I believe. Timothy is wrestling; he's the classic guy. He's wrestling with the "stuff." He's wrestling with the fact that he never fits in to one place. He's wrestling with fact that he's what the culture would call literally "a half-breed." His father's a Gentile and his mom's a Jew. The Jews don't really want him, don't really accept him; his Gentile community doesn't really want him, doesn't really want to accept him. He's got amazing gifts; he's taken in by Paul, he's affirmed, he's encouraged, he's trained, he's got great success, yet it seems as if he's not able to get beyond some of his stuff and he stays in that "boy" cycle. Here, even though he is accomplishing great things and he's doing great things, here it seems like Paul is saying to him, "Okay, Timothy, I know you're going back there, I know you're starting to wrestle with some shame, I know you're starting to wrestle with feeling like you're not successful enough, or feeling like you're not accepted. You're starting to go back, I think." I think this is what Paul is doing here. He's starting to notice that Timothy is perhaps going back and using that either as an excuse or as an escape or Timothy is back to that boy life. Paul says to him, "Man, man, man. Be a man." That doesn't mean "Suck it up," what the world today says sometimes. Not "suck it up" but "claim what you have." "Claim the call and realize that being a man doesn't mean that everyone's going to follow you. Look at me, Timothy; I'm being rejected right now. Everybody in Asia turned away from me, everybody left me. I can only name a few people that I want to lift up as an encouragement. They've all left me. I'm old enough to be your dad and looked what happened with me, Timothy." It's not about whether people follow or accept, it's about what do you do, how are you living, who you are.

I believe that we all live in these two worlds today. I believe that we live in a world that on the one hand is the world of childhood – and I don't mean chronologically – but it's the world of toys. It's the world that measures value by how much sand you can throw on somebody else in the playgrounds of life, or how many toys you can capture as people's heads are turned as you are going into the sand box. It's a world of recreation that is not "recreation." If you think about the word "recreation" it means "to re-create," it means to get filled again, it means to be able to be re-empowered again. But no, this kind of recreation is a recreation that is an avoidance of life isn't it? Isn't so much of what recreation is today a way just to pull away and not have to think, to be totally avoiding what's going on.

There is this world - and then there is this other world, the world of what it is to truly be a man of God, a woman of God. A world that is filled with great joy and great pleasure and great things but it is also a world that's filled with responsibility. It's a world that's filled with an understanding of who I am supposed to be and whose I am supposed to be and how do I live in those two worlds. How do I let the one world that I so desperately want to win, the world where I want to be a man, the world where I want to be a spiritual adult, how do I let that world start to inform the other? How do I let it start to take over?

What is it for us to be a mature congregation? I don't mean that in a condescending way as if it's immaturity, that we are opposed. But what I mean by that is how is it that we know who we are and whose we are? One of the gifts of our body I think, one of the gifts of our congregation, that we have that. With all that we are doing with this Capital Campaign - it's \$8.5 million. Man, I can't get my head around that. You start to think on one level, "It's like wow. We are building some great stuff." But that's what's so interesting to me, that's not why we are doing it and it is so clear. We are doing it because people are being drawn to us and we want to be able draw them. We are doing it because we are strengthening where we are so that we can continually reach out and minister to the world and bring the love and the grace of Christ and that's so much in this throughout. It's so overwhelming to me as I see that. I think how do we continue to build on that as a body and as individuals, to grow into that kind of maturity? How is that legacy that we can leave for the next generations if it takes the Lord another generation or two to come back? Or the legacy that we have for those outside.

Benjamin wasn't out on the street; he was out within the congregation this last week and talked to some people within the body. These are all members or people who have come to First. Benjamin asked them, "Can you briefly share a little bit of what God has been doing in your life this past year?" What we heard from them was a number of wonderful testimonies, some wonderful people talking about what Christ has done in their lives and how He's impacted their lives through this body. It was such an amazing thing as you start to reflect upon that. The thing that is so powerful in this as we reflect on our life together as we come together - and for those of you who are visiting with us I hope you'll hear this about us, because it's important because we want you to be part of us - the truth is as Timothy knows, the life we would like to have is all golden. We would like for it all to be groundbreaking days and days of great celebration and days of great promise. We would like for life just to work out where everything happens the way I want it to happen and every plan I had came out and everything just fell in line, but you know that's not really what life is. Life doesn't stay nice and clean and gold. When you start digging in life, it starts to get dirty and messy and things get hard and difficult. That's where we become adults. It's where we grow into the legacy that Christ already has for us. It's where we grow into the love and the grace of Jesus Christ.

Our middle son, Adam, is 17 years old and Adam is 100% a 17 year-old boy. That would fill up like 83 sermons if I wanted to talk about those (laughter). He's named after his grandfather; he's named after Sheryl's dad. I've shared with some of you before, Sheryl's dad just had a huge impact on my life and has been a mentor and a father to me in so many ways, but we named Adam after Sheryl's dad. It was a way for us just to be able to honor him but also to have great hope for Adam. Adam went to Atlanta this weekend on his own to see his grandfather. His grandfather is in hospice care. He's wrestling with dementia and Alzheimer's. He's not able to talk. We don't think he probably knows who's there. Every once in a while he will respond by whistling, but he's been on hospice for the whole year and we're just waiting. Adam wanted to go and see his granddad. The funny thing about it is that when he goes, he'll sit for hours in the room with his grandfather, just the two of them for hours. He tells him stories that his grandfather told him when he was a little boy. He calls him "Mort." He says, "Hey, Mort, do

you remember this story that you told me about when you were in the Navy?" He goes on and just for hours and tells him these stories over and over and over. He called last night during the Tennessee/South Carolina game at a point when South Carolina was doing pretty well, and that's all I'm saying about that (laughter). He was telling us that he was with his granddad and telling us what was going on. When he hung up, Sheryl looked at me and said, "You know, now that's a legacy. That's a legacy." A grandfather's love that has eternally changed a little boy's life.

The thing that I find so interesting about that is that's a legacy that you only come to know when the shovel gets dirty, when life gets hard and when you are digging into stuff that you don't want to be digging into and life doesn't turn out the way you want it to. Your health didn't play out the way you wanted it to, your success in business or relationships didn't happen the way you thought it should or the way it could, and everything's not gold anymore. That's when the legacy comes; that's when the power and the gift of Christ comes. That's what Paul so desperately wants Timothy to know, that's what Joel wants the church to know. That's what Joel says when he's speaking to the church and he says, "God says when that day comes I'll pour out my spirit. I'll pour out my spirit, and when that spirit comes no one will be put to shame. My spirit will be poured out on all flesh, your sons and your daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men shall see visions." That's the legacy. That's what it is.

That's what you and I have and that's what we have to offer the world. That's what we have to bring to the world, is this legacy that when life gets hard and when the shovel gets dirty and the gold starts to wear off, and it's not only tarnished but it is totally removed and you are just there, that's when the legacy of grace and love and forgiveness and hope and promise – the irony of joy – comes for all of this stuff. For all of this stuff when someone says, "I'd rather be there sitting with someone who I don't think even knows who I am and finds joy in that." The world can't get that, but you and I do because that's where we find the Kingdom of God. That's where you and I find it, when we are with each other in the joys and celebrations, yes, but also when we are with each other when there is need and when there is brokenness and when there is dirt.

There is a school in Brooklyn called the Brooklyn Jewish School for the Disabled. They were doing a big fundraiser not long ago, really trying to keep the school open. In the midst of the fundraiser they invited some parents to speak about the impact that the school was making on their children's lives. One father stood up and said, "I'm supposed to be talking about the school but I want to share something with you that happened to me just a weekend ago. My son Shaya, a young teenager, is disabled severely. He is able to walk some, but his motor skills are not such that he can run very long distances. He's not able to hold his own balance very well. He's not able to talk; he doesn't communicate with us by words, but we can tell by the way he looks and by his expressions what's going on. He spends most of his time in a wheel chair and we do the best we can with him. Last weekend I was out with him," his father said, "in the park and I was walking, pushing him in his wheelchair. All of a sudden we saw a game of baseball being played. It was a pick up game it looked like at first glance, 18 boys out there just playing a great game of baseball. I realized that my son Shaya was so drawn to them that I pushed him over closer to the game. Shaya's attention was just focused on the game. As I started to try to move him away Shaya shook a little bit and he turned his head again and I knew that he wanted to stay there and watch the game. We stood there and we watched an inning or so. Shaya's attention never changed," his father said. "He just focused on the game, so much so that something spoke to me in that and I went over to these boys. They seemed like they were 12, 13, 14 years old. I went over to them and I said 'My son here in the wheelchair has never had a chance to play baseball in his entire life. He's never had the opportunity to do anything like that. Is there any chance he could just once stand up in the batter's box and take a swing? Is there any way he could do that?'"

“The boy that he went to said to him, ‘Mister, this looks like a pick up game, but this is a pretty competitive game right now for the ownership of the neighborhood. We’re down seven runs and we’ve only got one more inning to go. Well, we’re down that much, if we’re really down in the last inning and there’s really no hope for us and it’s the last out, we’ll go ahead and let him bat. Is that okay?’ The father said, ‘That’s fine. That’s fine.’ Well, as baseball often happens, not for the Rockies, but you can make a comeback. “They start, they get up to bat, and they’re seven runs down, they get a couple of hits and score a couple of runs, and lo and behold here they are three men on base, two outs, they’re down by two runs. The next good hit can win the game for them. Two outs and the little boy looks over at the father and the father says, ‘I know there’s no chance that Shaya’s going to get up. I’m just watching this game.’”

“The little boy walks over to the father and he says, ‘Come on.’ He gets his team around and they get Shaya out of the wheelchair and they help him over to the batter’s box and one of the boys helps him hold the bat. The team out in the field begins to think that this is a win for them, they’ve got a lock on it, but something happens and they start to think. ‘You can just see what’s happening,’ the father says. “The pitcher moves up a couple of feet from the mound and he lobs one in for Shaya. Someone helping hold the bat tries to help Shaya swing and he swings wildly and he misses totally, but everybody starts shouting, ‘Shaya, Shaya.’ They didn’t know him from Adam, ‘Shaya, Shaya,’ but they’ve learned his name. The pitcher gets the ball again and he moves up even closer and just slowly kind of lobs it in. They try to help swing but his motor skills are so bad that he misses wildly, but they shout, ‘Shaya, Shaya.’ Finally the pitcher literally comes up no more than two feet from the batter’s box and just holds the ball and tries to lift it up and the boy on the other team helps Shaya enough to make enough contact with the ball that it goes from contact to about 18 inches off the bat.”

“Everybody starts to yell, ‘Shaya. Run, Shaya, run.’ Shaya starts to try run. People are helping him and he’s running just as much as he can to get to first base. The pitcher picks up the ball and he throws wildly over first base. ‘Run, Shaya, run.’ Shaya gets to first base and the outfielder takes the ball. ‘Run, Shaya, run.’ He throws the ball way over second base, third base. ‘Run, Shaya, run.’ The ball’s just being thrown around out there. ‘Go to home, Shaya, go to home.’” Shaya runs in, two people now helping him almost just dragging him getting him to home base and as he does he lifts up his leg so that he can stamp down on home plate. Then everybody, both teams, pick him up and they are parading him around and they are saying, ‘Shaya, Shaya, Shaya.’ The father says, “At that moment, 18 boys reached their level of heaven’s perfection.”

That’s what you and I have to offer the world, to put aside our game and draw others in, to welcome the love of Christ into other’s lives, to live our lives in such a way that we find joy in the great games of life, but more importantly we find joy and meaning and thanksgiving in those places where we are given the privilege of being men and women of faith. Do that today. It’s not an age thing. It’s a faith thing - to trust. Trust - and reach your level of heaven’s perfection even in your brokenness.

Thanks be to Him. Amen.

Sermon Dictionary Notes:

¹ Diane West – writer for the *Washington Times*, contributor to *Lou Dobbs Tonight* and *Lou Dobbs This Week*, and author of *The Death of the Grown-up: How America's Arrested Development is Bringing Down Western Civilization* published in 2007.